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5 Questions to Mary Kouyoumdjian (composer)

ARLENE & LARRY DUNN on May 8, 2015 at 6:00 am

*Composer Mary Kouyoumdjian has just returned from Armenia where she joined in the observance of the centennial of the **Armenian Genocide**, which included a concert at which her Silent Cranes received its world premiere by the Kronos Quartet, presented by the Yerevan Perspectives 16th International Music Festival. The U.S. premiere will be held at **Roulette** in Brooklyn on Tuesday, May 12, 2015, at 8:00 PM. We caught up with Mary to find out more about her experiences in Armenia and the plans for the Roulette event.*

HOW DID YOU APPROACH CONFRONTING THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE THROUGH THE LENS OF MUSIC?

I'm a firm believer in approaching controversial topics through the arts, and that doing so can create opportunities for conversations when words alone may be too difficult to say or hear. One particular topic that has been historically "difficult" to openly talk about has been the Armenian Genocide—the mass extermination of 1.5 million Armenians by the Ottoman Turks, now 100 years ago. While more than 20 countries and 43 U.S. states have formally

century later, this historic event continues to be just as unresolved as it was before. As an Armenian-American composer who values freedom of speech and whose family fled the genocide, I feel this is an essential time to remember those who were lost, to truly acknowledge this crime against humanity, and to continue a dialogue about what happened and how we can prevent further genocides from happening in the future.



Silent Cranes (photo: Laurie Olinder)

Silent Cranes is a 30-minute multimedia work commissioned for the incomparable Kronos Quartet, with projection design by artist [Laurie Olinder](#), poetry by Alternative Radio host and investigative journalist [David Barsamian](#), recordings of Armenian folk songs made between 1912 and 1916, and recorded testimonies of genocide survivors. It's inspired by the Armenian folk song *Groung (Crane)* in which the singer calls out to the migratory bird, begging for word from their homeland, only to have the crane respond with silence and fly away. Those who were lost during the genocide are cranes in their own way, unable to speak of the horrors they witnessed, and I feel that it's the responsibility of the living to give them a voice.

The most difficult challenge I faced was the physical act of repeatedly listening to the recorded testimonies, by real people with the most unfathomable experiences, in order to edit and process the audio for the backing track. It just never got easier, which in retrospect was a good thing. What was *not* challenging was working with my wonderful collaborators Laurie and David. Laurie's film is visually stunning and filled with rich images iconic to the Armenian culture and from the genocide era, and David's words are so meaningful, coming from someone who interviewed many of the survivors heard in this piece and who himself is the son of a genocide survivor.



Kronos Quartet (photo: Jay Blakesberg)

WHAT IS IT LIKE WORKING WITH KRONOS QUARTET?

Making a new work for the **Kronos Quartet** is what I hope every collaborative process would be like! This is my third collaboration with the quartet, and so far each of them has come without limitations and with an invaluable amount of faith in the project. Any hesitations like “Will this be too difficult to play?...Is the piece too controversial?...Will they be open to trying this out?” go completely out the window. They’re extremely open-minded and invested in the

music so well, and they are the true model of what a positive and inspiring creative team looks like.

HOW DID IT FEEL TO BE IN ARMENIA FOR THE CENTENNIAL COMMEMORATION?

I can barely put the experience of being in Armenia at the genocide centennial into words! Every April 24th, locals and the diaspora gather to walk miles up to the genocide memorial, and it was a surreal feeling to be there on the 100th anniversary. The premiere went so beautifully, the audience was warm and open-hearted, and the sense of community amongst this small population of dispersed people was so very moving.

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Hotel Elephant at Carnegie Hall (photo: Julien Jourdes)

WORKS WILL THEY PERFORM?

I'm so very happy to have [Hotel Elephant](#) on this program, as they've been by my side on quite a few of these works over the past several years. This group, comprised of my dearest friends, will perform works including *This Should Feel Like Home*, commissioned by Carnegie Hall, a self-portrait of what it was like to visit Armenia for the first time sampling field recordings from the capitol to varying villages; *Dzov Yerku Kooynov [Sea of Two Colors]*, commissioned by the American Composers Forum/JFund, a portrait of composer [Komitas Vardapet](#), who survived the Armenian Genocide and suffered through 20 years of post-traumatic stress disorder; and the world premiere of *Everlastingness*, with lyrics by friend and librettist [Royce Vavrek](#), featuring special guest baritone [Jeffrey Gavett](#), a portrait of painter Arshile Gorky, who survived the Armenian Genocide and lived through a series of tragic events upon his displacement to the United States.

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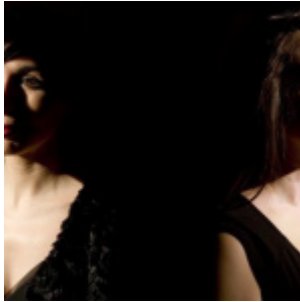
Silent Cranes: The Music of Mary Kouyoumdjian, Performed by Kronos Quartet and Hotel Elephant

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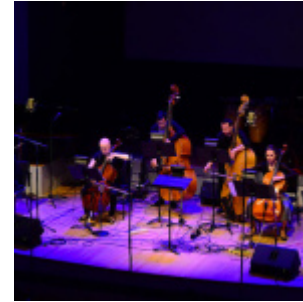
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Ear Heart Music's season kickoff: Hotel Elefant at Roulette [Slideshow]



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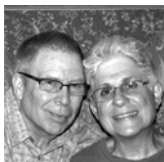
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ARLENE & LARRY DUNN

Arlene and Larry Dunn are pure amateurs of contemporary music based in Oberlin, Ohio.

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(2017 OJAI FESTIVAL MUSIC
DIRECTOR)

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THIS WEEK: CONCERTS IN
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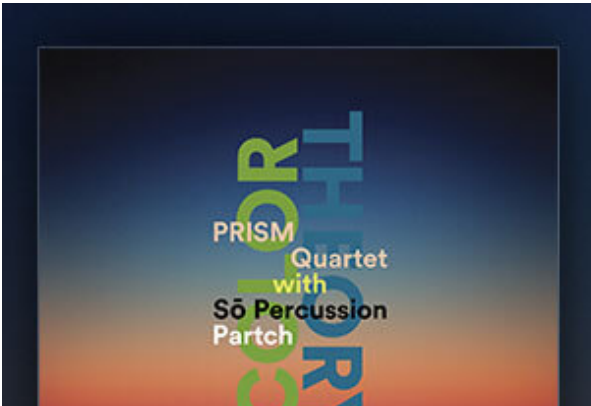
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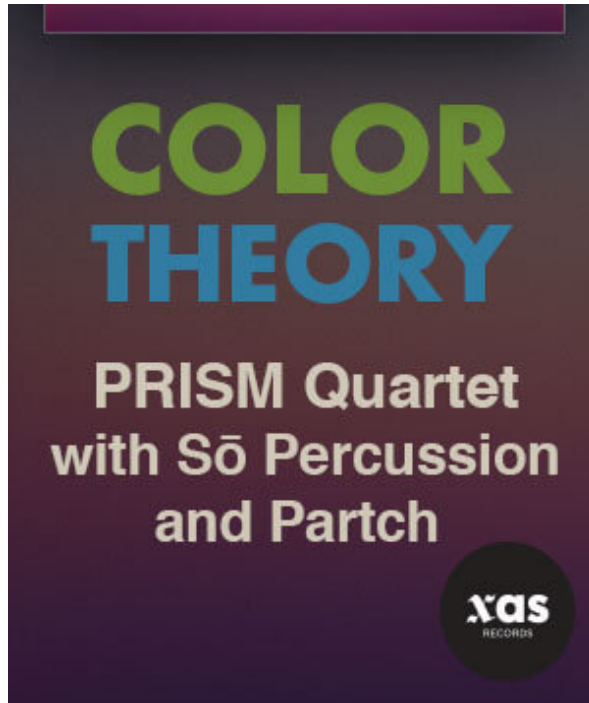
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5 QUESTIONS TO NICOLE
MITCHELL (COMPOSER,
FLUTIST)

5





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